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ABSTRACT

This paper follows the development of and changes in relationships between university faculty and middle school staff involved in a Professional Development School (PDS) group. Discussion is based on two imaginary "snapshots" contrived from descriptions of the group at their first meeting and again at the year-end meeting. The snapshots reveal a visual image from one university faculty member's field notes that describe a group of middle school teachers and university faculty and interns who joined them to become a collaborative inquiry group. Reflecting on what happened between the "before" and "after" pictures provides insight into the nature of work and research in two cultures and informs the faculty member's planning for involvement in future PDS initiatives. The PDS collaboration focused on differentiated instruction and also worked on changing the standard social studies curriculum for middle grades. The university faculty member emerged from the PDS experience with new expectations, a closer working relationship with teachers, and a better idea about what her student teachers would be observing during student teaching. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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Before and After Pictures: The Makeover of Professional Relationships Through PDS Collaboration

by

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Faculty and Graduate Students' Diverse Understandings of Collaboration
Through A Year in Professional Development Schools

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Two "snapshots" contrived from descriptions of a Professional Development School (PDS) group at our first meeting and again at our year-end meeting are the focus of this paper. They reveal a visual image of my field notes that describe a group of middle school teachers and the university faculty and interns who joined them to become a collaborative inquiry group. Reflecting on what happened between the "before" and "after" pictures provides insight into the nature of work and research in two cultures and informs my planning for involvement in future PDS initiatives.

When our group of middle school teachers and college professors first met together for the PDS orientation, we went through the process of introducing ourselves by name and by identifying the classes we were teaching at the time. This was actually an unnecessary formality since we already knew each other tangentially. Students of mine at the university had been placed in their classrooms for clinical internships so we had a context of familiarity. Admittedly, I had listened with interest to overhear which one of the PDS Collaborative Inquiry Groups these particular social studies teachers were going to choose. I wanted to be in the same group. I wanted to get to know them better, to work with them on something of mutual professional interest. I had come to respect them because of my time as an observer in their classes and as a co-mentor of the interns. I had in my mind some issues that I hoped we might investigate in our group, confident that the teachers would also find them interesting and relevant. The group initiative of making introductions seemed to be a good sign that we were beginning a new sort of relationship with each other. Although PDS participation was required as staff development for the teachers in this middle school, university faculty participation was voluntary. We all added

to our introductions a "tag line" to explain why we had chosen to join this particular PDS group instead of one of the others that were options. Most people referred to the fact that social studies classes contain such a broad spectrum of student ability levels and that they really wanted to do a better job of meeting the needs of all students. We were all interested in examining content and exploring new teaching strategies. Bolstered and re-assured by our familiarity, we laughed and teased comfortably feeling that indeed we "belonged" together because we all worked in the same content area discipline. The wide-eyed countenance that personified our group spirit was perhaps partly the result of relief that we had found a good niche for ourselves in this initiative, partly excitement that something good was going to come out of this, and partly nervous hopefulness that we could all continue to get along and maintain our instant good rapport. I think we all wanted to be successful at this "PDS endeavor" that had suddenly become another dimension of our respective cultures of work.

Our first imaginary group photo is of 5 smiling people outside a sprawling, modern middle school building, lined up under a banner printed with the word "Differentiation" across it. Notice the person in the middle with a tailored jacket and slightly higher heels, (if she had been a man there would have been a conspicuous necktie, maybe one of the ones with multicultural kids on it). This is the university professor who dressed up just slightly, only because this is the first meeting and she wants to convey that she conscientiously prepared for the special event of coming out here to their school; it is a special thing for her and she respects them. The others are wearing sensible shoes and one has a wooden hall pass sticking out of a front pocket. One grabbed a globe to hold in the picture as a prop, symbolic of the fact that they are

all social studies teachers, and because they had joked that they wanted to stand behind something so as not to look fat in the picture. Facial expressions include the professor's exaggerated smile and outstretched arms around the waists of the two flanking teachers. One teacher is caught by the camera looking away with a grimace because she spotted a student of hers sneaking out the side door of the school building. That was just before she excused herself from the rest of the meeting while she attended to the errant student. Another teacher clutches a very large, professionally printed notebook; the significance of which only becomes apparent much later. Notice the three people standing in the distant background of the photo- one of them with a pair of safety goggles dangling around her neck. Another one of them also has one of the big notebooks. These people, (a college professor and two school science teachers), are about to ask to join the group in the foreground because they have only three in their group. It seems to them like too small of a number for a PDS group. Also, they asked around and found out that we were interested in a topic that was rather like what they were interested in. The middle school science teachers assured the professor that the two groups would be working on the same thing. (So since we knew them, and liked them, we welcomed them into our happy little group.) We just never bothered to re-take the photo to include them in the foreground.

Taking the place of field notes in my records at this point are copies of the forms that our group, as well as all the other PDS groups, filled out to submit to the coordinator. They outlined our proposed schedule of meetings, goals and ideas for PDS activities. I kept a copy when it was decided that we would have co-facilitators and that I would be the one from the university. The other facilitator would be the school based resource teacher with a floating schedule. She could make copies and phone calls more easily than

the other teachers. Since her office was near that of the PDS coordinator, she could get the duplicate set of our records turned in to the PDS box.

The middle school teachers took the lead on the scheduling discussion since it was their staff development days that were set aside for PDS group meetings. Some additional days were suggested as times that the group should plan to meet because they were days when "the differentiation consultant" would be in town. The other college professor and I began noticing what seemed to be another agenda playing itself out in our group meetings. There were references to "the model" that seemed to be cropping up with increasing frequency. When our puzzlement became apparent, our colleagues explained that they had a central office directive to revise their curricular units. They had been told to show differentiated instruction to accommodate a variety of learners, especially academically gifted students, in their heterogeneous classes. A consultant had provided training in her particular model of differentiation. The resource material had been purchased and there would be opportunities to travel to see classes that had already completed the program and were following the model. It was suggested that we (the college professors) could even go along on the field trips if we wanted to. This was described as an expensive "packaged" program in which the district had invested as a result of some parental demands. Curriculum administrators in the district had decided that the teachers would submit units of study that demonstrated how they would differentiate instruction by the end of the term. This was the task hanging over the heads of our PDS colleagues. It was now clear what our colleagues intended to do with PDS time. They were going to use time in the "Differentiation" PDS group to complete the district-mandated differentiated unit plans.

This bit of information was poignant for the two of us from the university, but we tried not to show anything but interest in learning more about this particular model while offering to bring in some articles by other educational researchers on the same topic. The offer was met with polite acceptance; and when the articles were distributed at the next meeting everyone seemed grateful and carefully put them away to be read later. It was decided that a good first expenditure would be to buy a copy of the book written by the consultant hired by the school district for everyone in the group who did not have one. I was relatively sure that I had a copy on my own bookshelf so I did not raise my hand to indicate I needed one.

It was not difficult, in the pleasant and professionally conscientious environment of our PDS meetings, for me to put aside my disappointment that we were not all going to start off together as researchers/collaborators on a site specific problem. After all, I could learn a great deal from this and I loved the camaraderie of these teachers. When I asked for time on the agenda to share with them a request from the state department of education they were gracious and interested. I had been asked to assemble a group of social studies educators to review a proposed change in the standard curriculum for middle grades. The teachers graciously agreed to participate. We stayed together at the end of a meeting after the science trio left and went through the review together in what was a stimulating and informative session that everyone seemed not to mind doing. I continued to admire and respect these dedicated and articulate educators. In spite of feeling somewhat ancillary to the main task that our group had adopted - writing and sharing the revised units of study, I felt that PDS was providing an opportunity for something important to take place in the schools, and in some way I was a part of it. I just

wasn't sure in what way, exactly. I became increasingly reflective about what was happening and shared my thoughts with my university colleague. She was similarly vexed, and with a better defined and more pressing personal research agenda than I had, she was more adamant about her disappointment at the turn of events.

As I tried to figure out what I might have done differently early on, I was prompted to go back to my first pages of notes, made months earlier. I had prepared in advance some ideas to take to the PDS orientation in case I was asked for my opinion about what a PDS group should be. I had written something after reviewing the Holmes Group publications and our own PDS proposal. The main points in my outline were about the ideal of equal partners working together in a mutually beneficial relationship, using college and school based faculties to enhance pre-service and in-service programs, engaging in research and collaboration, and piloting innovation for the ultimate benefit of school children. When I looked through those notes, the phrase about research stood out prominently. I found myself consumed with figuring out how I could tie what was happening in my PDS group to something resembling research.

There had been many informal discussions at the university about "action" research among those of us interested, (and with some colleagues who were definitely not interested), in getting involved with a PDS group while the initiative was in the planning stages. I had decided to accept, at least for the time being, that action research could be viable and useful. I was reconciled to accept a theoretical model of the sort of research that could transpire through the collaboration of school based teachers with university based teachers. I decided it would reflect the proper "esprit de corps" and increase my

potential for success with action research if I set out believing not only that it could happen, but that it could be useful.

In brief, I accepted the theoretical notion that the action research we could do in a PDS setting would be practical, focused on real school contexts, and aimed at informing decision making. The form of action research I might get involved with through PDS could, for example, have a slant toward evaluation while the middle school teachers might simultaneously do more practice-based action research to help them understand and improve their work (McMillan & Wergin, 1998). In a PDS setting, we would not be trying to do traditional research to uncover truth that would necessarily apply to the rest of the world. We would presumably be about the business of gathering data to help enhance curricula and practice at this school at this particular point in time. Our aim was to inform decision making and serve these teachers, our student interns, and the children who reported to this school during this year and the next.

In my reflective speculation about what the point of view of the middle school teachers on the topic of doing research might be, I guessed that they would say that hypothesizing new teaching strategies to meet an identified need, trying out those strategies with students and analyzing the outcomes sounded like pretty useful research. And besides, the procedure for doing all this was outlined in "the notebook." Thus, I reconciled myself to the fact that in our PDS group, the closest we were going to come to research was the completion of their mandated assignment. The local school district had made a significant financial investment in a program of curriculum innovation because a need had been identified and documented. The program's designer was hired as a consultant, and an expensive kit of materials had been purchased. Thus the resources for

completing the task were available. Arrangements had been made to provide opportunities for the teachers to see the model in action in other classrooms in other districts. Instructional practice would be examined and teachers would make decisions about how they could improve strategies to benefit children. And PDS involvement provided time for the teachers to do all of this. How could I try to divert time spent doing those things? Why would I even want to? This was a noble goal and actually seemed to be a good way to use staff development time.

So why was I not more enthusiastic about what was happening in my PDS group? I enjoyed looking over the social studies lesson plans and being asked for advice or for editing services sometimes. Many great teaching ideas were shared when we talked one-on-one about content. This would be helpful for me in my methods courses. Group members increasingly worked individually as time went on, getting together only at the beginning and end of our PDS sessions to do a bit of sharing. Their projects that were nearing completion were looking quite good. And the outcomes that were shaping up, according to my observations, looked a lot like what I had imagined the outcomes of action research, or at least the work of PDS groups, had the potential to bring about. So why is my imaginary "after" photo of my PDS group not hanging prominently on some wall of virtual reality as a source of pride and professional accomplishment?

The "snapshot" of our PDS group at the end has additional people lined up under the "Differentiation" banner. Some student interns who sat in on discussions and worked with some of the teachers on their unit plans are kneeling down front in the foreground of the picture. Five teachers stand in a line, holding in front of them nicely packaged unit plans, flanking the smiling resource teacher group co-facilitator. The

teachers are looking straight at the camera and seem contented and serene. In the background of the picture are the two university faculty members, peering over the shoulders of the teachers and smiling bravely, as they stand on tip-toe to be seen.

My "before" and "after" snapshots chronicle a professional "make over" of my thinking about professional development school involvement. I emerged from the experience with no research data and no recognition for service that will be acknowledged by my university. Yet, I have a closer working relationship with the teachers who supervise my students and I have a better idea about what my students will observe in their classes. I feel more comfortable, familiar and welcome at that middle school. When asked to evaluate my experience at the end of the term, I offered praise for my colleagues and their work and rated my PDS involvement as a positive, professionally enriching experience. It was, and I still hold that opinion. However, as a result of my reflection on what happened in our group I am a bit more cautious about recommending PDS initiatives without some cautionary remarks. Among my lingering thoughts are these observations and some notations from the literature on PDS which have enriched by reflection:

(1) The traditional expectations and roles that identify us and our work in either school or university settings don't enhance PDS associations if our collaborative goal is inquiry or research and practical innovation. A conventional model, in which university faculty conduct research and schools accept and apply the findings, is challenged, if not set aside, by PDS (Wagner, 1997). Even PDS literature which reinforces traditional dichotomies of professional roles shortchanges the potential of these initiatives (Leo-Nyquist, 1997).

(2) People come to collaboration with diverse skills, experiences, resources and expectations that ought to be disclosed and discussed at the outset. If efforts to get everyone equally equipped to participate in the mission of the group are necessary, they should be undertaken immediately. Carter and Doyle (1995) make a good case for the equalization process. Sardo-Brown (1990) stresses the potential value of equipping teachers to conduct research in their own classrooms.

(3) Partnerships are hard to equalize if time schedules and meeting location are in the domain of just one of the partners. These factors, time and place, are just two of the variables that often challenge PDS collaboration. Under most current paradigms PDS involves negotiating two separate worlds of work (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1998).

(4) An assignment to complete is not the same thing as either research or inquiry. The units that our PDS group completed were assigned as a prescriptive solution to a problem. Genuine inquiry into the problem that motivated the bureaucratic directive would not have started with an answer (Wagner, 1998). On the other hand, the answer-driven approach resulted in some positive outcomes in a relatively short amount of time. PDS programs must recognize that in public schools, the lack of time is a defining characteristic of the work culture that hinders research and inquiry.

(5) The democratic impulse to elect co-facilitators from the school and from the university can serve as a useful guide for partnerships, but it does not necessarily guarantee maximal outcomes. A designated liaison, someone that Sandholtz and Finan (1998) call a "boundary spanner," may be necessary to effectively link the institutions.

(6) Relationship building is a very valuable potential benefit of professional development school initiatives (Rothman, 1993). It can be as professionally valuable as research and service whether it is achieved by design, as in the case of my PDS group, or serendipitously as a by-product of a group of people working together toward a shared goal. This I accept in spite of the cautions that we ought not suggest that a communitarian model can replace an emphasis on academic learning to enhance school effectiveness (Phillips, 1997).

Being in a PDS group was time well spent for me. The practical experience, not clouded by unpleasant inter-personal relations or negative feelings, did much to stimulate my intellectual interest in professional development schools and my clinical experiences were enriched. I learned a great deal about my self and my profession, and found a new way to articulate my tacit understandings about the relationships of schools of education to public schools. My self-respect and respect for teachers in the PDS school are intact, and most importantly I think that some children benefited from the work of our group.

Between the "before and after" snapshots that document this experience was a "makeover" of my idealism and expectations. I am not unhappy with the outcomes and not too disappointed that I did get to do what I hoped to in our "collaborative inquiry group." Among the issues that I am prompted to investigate through research as a result of my experience are these: (1) the amount of time (and duration of time) that a group should commit to working together; (2) the most useful sort of reporting data that should be required of groups, and (3) the sort of formative and summative evaluations that should be applied to evaluate PDS groups. I expect to continue my makeover and be in more PDS "snapshots" in the future. -S.A.G

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